Discussion Paper

Participatory Policy Analysis and Social Justice[i]

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Several researchers have noted that racism is deeply embedded in the policies of the modern Western State (e.g. House 1999, Williams 1996). There is every reason to believe that this is as true for multiculturalism policy as it is for any other area. James Walker (2000) argues persuasively that most advancements in Canadian social justice policies have come about when those adversely affected by existing policies and practices have fought for change. But, as others have shown, even when issues are raised by community activists and scholars, the policy process in the area of federal Multiculturalism Policy has largely been controlled by government officials (e.g. Joshee 1995a, Pal 1993). I believe that the lack of sustained involvement in the multicultural policy process by those who are most affected by it is a key reason that the policies have perpetuated the very inequities they have purported to address.

Participatory policy analysis promises an avenue to ensure sustained involvement of interested parties in an informed dialogue on policy development. Peter DeLeon (1997) notes that the basic idea behind participatory policy analysis is that "panels composed of citizens at large are empowered to participate in deliberations over public policy issues over an extended period of time" (DeLeon p.111). A broad pool of appropriate individuals is identified and a subset of this group is invited to participate in discussions on the direction of the policy. Members of the panel are provided with adequate support and a "relatively unbiased education into the issues at hand" (DeLeon p.112) to ensure they are able to understand and manage the complexities of the dialogue. The question I will address below is: how could this process – or a variant of it – be used to ensure the principles of social justice are infused into the multiculturalism policy process?

Defining Social Justice

Since at least the era of Pierre Trudeau, Canadians have taken pride in our efforts to create "the just society". As others (Nagy 2000, Ng 2000) have indicated, our vision of social justice has included notions of equality, equity, and fairness. What is quite apparent is that we are still negotiating the meaning of

each of these terms. My interpretation of these terms comes from my understanding of the literature, my past experiences as a community activist and government official, and my current role as a teacher and educational researcher.

Like Morwenna Griffiths (1998), I believe that "social justice is more fundamental than equality as a guide to how we should act in relation to society" (Griffiths p.86) and that at its base, social justice "is that which promotes the well-being of communities and of each of the individuals within them" (Griffiths p.89). We may at some level believe that all people are created equal but the reality of our social lives is that we live in a state of inequality. Equality is not a given but an ideal towards which we must work. And equality in this context cannot mean sameness. As Judge Rosalie Abella noted in 1984, "[f]ormerly, we thought that equality only meant sameness and that treating persons as equals meant treating everyone the same. We now know that to treat everyone the same may be to offend the notion of equality. Ignoring differences may mean ignoring legitimate needs. It is not fair to use the differences between people as an excuse to exclude them arbitrarily from equitable participation" (Abella p.3). The commitment to equity, then, is an acknowledgement that we are different and promoting the well being of the community requires that we take relevant differences into account. In addition, the principle of fairness recognizes that each person should be rewarded on the basis of what they need and deserve and that no one should labour under undo hardship. Social justice, then, combines the processes of recognition and redistribution such that the injustice of past and current discrimination is eradicated.

Participatory Policy Analysis

Policy analysis, or policy science, began to develop as a field after the Second World War. Originally it was seen as a way to improve the quality of policy deliberation by providing policy-makers with the knowledge necessary to make informed, rational decisions. Indeed, Harold Lasswell, one of the pioneers of the field, thought that increasing the quality of knowledge used in policy decisions would enhance democracy (DeLeon p. 7). Instead, policy analysis developed into an elitist activity that promotes the belief that only experts are able to provide the true and unbiased information on which policy development should be based. Within this paradigm, ordinary citizens are seen, at best, to be able to offer opinions that might be useful to consider but are far too subjective to use a basis for policy development. In all areas of the public sector traditional policy analysis has become the domain of experts and, as such, has contributed to the cynicism of citizens of Western democracies towards the political process. Some critics of traditional policy analysis make the case that, far from enhancing democracy, this practice has undermined it (e.g. Dryzek 1990). Participatory policy analysis has emerged as an alternate approach to providing input into policy decision-making.

Participatory policy analysis (PPA) is a term used to describe a variety of approaches to increasing citizen participation in the policy process. It has been defined as "a practical discipline which contributes to policy making by designing policy-analytical forums, providing favourable conditions for participation and facilitating and supporting the relevant debate and argumentation within this forum" (Mayer in Batenburg and Bongers 1999, n.p.). It is predicated on the belief that citizen participation is a necessary and important part of the policy process and that policy-makers have an obligation to ensure such participation.

In recognizing that meaningful participation is more than a matter of simply asking people for their opinions, PPA attempts to avoid the pitfalls of more common forms of citizen participation in policy-making such as public opinion polling and public consultation. While polling ostensibly allows the government to "consult" with a number of people across the country in a relatively short amount of time and with relatively little expense, it does not allow for informed dialogue and discussion to take place[ii]. In addition, the use of the telephone makes it extremely difficult for people with limited English to participate in the process. The standard public consultation process usually involves providing people with a limited amount of information on the proposed policy and then inviting them to either submit a brief outlining their position, appear at a public hearing to voice their opinion, or attend a meeting to present their information and engage with others who are interested in the policy field. Such consultations often do not take into account issues of power and social location as they might affect an individual's or a group's ability to participate effectively. As Jane Mansbridge (1997) has explained, "[a] history of dominance and subordination typically breeds inattention, even arrogance, on the part of the dominant group and distrust on the part of the subordinate group" (Mansbridge p.20). It is for this reason that within PPA there is an emphasis on "providing favourable conditions for participation."

A recent study of a major public consultation initiative in Quebec (Laforest 1999) has shown that people who were involved in the process did not believe that their opinion mattered to government officials. They believed that policy-makers had already decided what was going to be proposed and that the consultation was a mere formality. This belief was echoed by some of the participants at the Domain Seminar on Social Justice held in May 1999[iii]. At the Domain Seminar, one of the participants noted that, while she was certain that her fellow participants had listened carefully to her and had valued her contributions to the discussion, she had no confidence that the knowledge she brought to the table was going to be used in substantial way to inform policy decisions. This belief was grounded in past experiences where she had been involved in similar events and had received no follow-up information to explain what had happened as a result of the consultation. Moreover, when new policies were announced, they seemed to have no relation to the recommendations that had been made at the consultations. PPA addresses this concern by creating a forum for sustained dialogue where relationships and trust can be built. The on-going nature of the

conversation also allows individuals to explore ideas in greater depth than a one-time consultation.

Another concern regarding consultations is that the costs to participants are often quite high. Some of the participants in the Quebec study, for example, commented that the time and effort they put into preparing their presentations were incommensurate with the benefits they felt they received (Laforest p.11). At the Domain Seminar on Social Justice one participant noted that even though organizers were able to pay for travel, accommodation, and meals, the fact that the consultation took place on a Friday and Saturday meant that some people had to take a day off work. For this they were not compensated. For others it meant choosing between participating or keeping the Sabbath. Additionally, the format of our seminar, and indeed many other consultations that take place during "work hours", facilitates the involvement of those whose paid work is related to the policy area. In other words, this type of format reinforces rather than challenges the traditional policy analysis paradigm by ensuring that most of the people participating are, by virtue of their occupation, considered experts in the field. Although citizen participants in a PPA process are meant to be given some sort of honorarium, PPA as it is currently conceptualized does not adequately account for the costs of participation.

Rachel Laforest (1999) also found that, despite the concerns about the public consultation process, people continued to participate in these events because they saw other benefits. Specifically they spoke of the consultation as a means of publicly stating one's position, an avenue for educating the public about the issues, and a space for engaging in informed discussion and debate with others interested in the same issue. They also talked about using the opportunity to make a case that they would return to in subsequent interactions with the government officials (Laforest pp.8-12). PPA incorporates these benefits and expands on the opportunities for interaction.

Current PPA Models

There are at least five existing models of PPA. Each has unique benefits and challenges. While each of these models have in common the elements I have discussed above, they differ in the amount of time participants are asked to commit, the scope of deliberation, the method of participant selection, and the degree of control participants have over the final policy decisions. Having reviewed these models and taking into account the concerns and issues raised at the Domain Seminar and in the literature, I will propose a fifth model that I believe would be appropriate for continuing work in the area of social justice policy. I will also raise some issues that require further discussion before we can implement a PPA process in this policy field.

The first model, the citizen panel, has been seen to be most useful at a local level (Batenburg and Bongers 1999). A randomly selected group of individuals from a defined population is brought together for the purpose of offering opinions on a specified policy area. Participants are involved in several facilitated meetings over an extended period of time. During the initial meetings participants are educated about the issue in preparation of their ultimate task, which is to offer advice to policy-makers. The scope of their work is clearly, and often narrowly, defined in terms of a specific policy issue or decision. These panels are often struck by government officials who may also set limits on the types of contributions that will be acceptable. Government officials have no obligation to act on the advice of the panel. In short, a major drawback of these panels is that the traditional power structures are not challenged.

The second model has been called the "citizen jury" or the "deliberative assembly" (Mansbridge 1997). In this model a group of participants is chosen by representative sampling from a region-wide or nation-wide population "to deliberate and decide on contested issues, then advise the public and elected legislatures on their deliberations" (Mansbridge pp.11-12). Like the citizen panels, these bodies are struck for specific purposes and meet several times. As one of the assumptions of this model is that such a group of citizens would collectively bring with them the requisite knowledge for their task, government officials are not intended to "educate" these participants. Another key difference between the citizen jury and the citizen panel is that the deliberations of the jury are meant to influence public debate as well as political decision-making therefore the process would likely be more public and transparent. Again, government officials are under no obligation to act on the advice of the jury, however, the more public nature of the process builds in a measure of accountability that is missing from the panel model.

The third model that has been developed is called the "round table" (Olivo 1998). Unlike the other two models, round tables are not organized by government officials; they are self-organized fora where "citizens discuss pressing issues of public concern and may offer solutions" (Olivo 1998, 258). As independent bodies they are able to set their own parameters. They are designed to be as inclusive as possible of all of the individuals, groups, and positions associated with a particular policy field. All stakeholder groups are given equal representation at the table where the preferred method of decision-making is by consensus. Another key feature of the round table is that, unlike the panels and juries, government officials can be included as participants. When government officials are not included, the round table participants may find themselves struggling to find an avenue through which to communicate with policy-makers. Because they are not government-sponsored bodies, round tables may have no resources to compensate participants for their time and effort. In Germany, where this model has been implemented, some round tables have organized as groups and applied for government funding. This has raised concerns about

compromising the integrity of the participants and the process in order to acquire resources (Olivo 1998).

The fourth model, Citizen Action Programs (CAPs), was developed in the United States in the 1960's as a tool to eliminate poverty. While the CAPs were not successful in eliminating poverty, the project's success in reconfiguring the citizen-government relationship (Cole in Marston 1993) makes it a good model from which to learn. CAPs were designed to function at the neighbourhood level. Additionally, one representative from each CAP was elected by residents to sit on a citywide Community Action Agency (CAA). The CAAs also included representatives from private and public agencies (e.g., elected officials, members of the board of education, members of social welfare groups) and community leaders (e.g., religious, business). As time passed the CAPs gave way to a Citizen Participation Office which today acts as a citizen advocacy agency sitting within the municipal administrative structure. While this location within the bureaucracy provides permanence and resources it also creates potential problems of conflict of interest. CPO staff is responsible for educating and training citizens on the political decision-making process, thus strengthening community capacity and mobilizing citizens. This model supports and facilitates effective neighbourhood activism (Marston 1993). One criticism of this approach is that it deflects citizen attention from real political and economic issues to trivial issues of the distribution of resources (Katznelson in Marston 1993). It is also possible that this approach may only work at a local level.

The fifth model, called "citizen governance", suggests that ordinary citizens be given the responsibility of determining policy and administering programs (Box in Thomas 1999). This model would see a group of randomly selected citizens share governing duties with elected representatives. Subgroups of the larger body, known as governing committees, would be charged with duties related to a particular policy field. Elected officials would refer matters to the appropriate governing committees, monitor decision-making, and evaluate policy implementation. They may also make "final decisions in cases requiring mediation between competing interests" (Box in Thomas 1999, 85). Policy analysts would provide information to the members of governing councils to ensure they were making informed decisions. The greatest criticism of this model is that in many cases it replicates existing structures except that the people making decisions are chosen at random instead of through an open election. A variation on this model would see members of the governing committees chosen on the basis of descriptive characteristics that define segments of the population that are underrepresented in the elected assemblies. In either variant, this model would be very expensive and would create another level of governance with its attendant bureaucracy.

The Social Justice Panel

The social justice panel that I am proposing draws on the strengths of existing models and is firmly grounded in social justice principles. It seeks to provide a vehicle for on-going interaction among interested stakeholders, including government officials, and would address some of the concerns raised by critics of current policy processes. It begins from the premise that democracy, at its best, is a "process of communication across differences where citizens participate in decision-making to collectively determine the condition of their lives" (Fraser in Field 1999, 12). Thus the emphasis is on ensuring a dialogue in which particular attention is paid to the participation of those who have traditionally been excluded from the process.

My position is informed by Jane Mansbridge's (1997) discussion of descriptive representation in which she highlights the need for the participation in decision-making of historically subordinated or oppressed groups. In particular she speaks to the mistrust and miscommunication between members of these groups and members of dominant groups. She also highlights the need for underrepresented groups to be involved in the discussion of "uncrystallized"[iv] issues that are of particular interest to them.

I am also influenced by Iris Marion Young's notion of "asymmetrical reciprocity" (Young 1997). Young makes the point that, while there is a certain common sense appeal to trying to achieve understanding by seeing things from the point of view of others, it is an unrealistic and questionable goal. She explains that the idea of reversing positions tends to obscure real differences between people. Moreover, it is not possible for people who have different social locations to actually reverse positions. Instead, she suggests that we begin by acknowledging that we are different, that we will never be able to step inside someone else's skin, and attempt from there to try to understand the other perspective in a spirit of humility and respect. This leads us to "make our moral and political judgements, then, not only by taking account of one another's interests and perspectives, but also by considering the collective social processes and relationships that lie between us and which we have come to know together by discussing the world" (Young 1997, 59).

Finally, I draw on a vision of "contested citizenship" as described by Ann Field (1999). Field engages with work by Chantal Mouffe on radical democracy, a term used to describe "the development of a political system which accounts for diversity by rethinking political participation" (Field p.8). She explains that simply inviting participation in an essentially oppressive system will not, in and of itself, change the structure of that system. Thus, while we are encouraging participation we must also seek to understand and change the structures that have prevented it.

Building from these insights and the knowledge that was shared at the Domain Seminar on Social Justice I propose that a Canadian social justice panel would be selective, drawing from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in

decision-making and particularly interested in the social justice issues that are part of the multiculturalism policy field. It would include activists, scholars, and government officials and would be established for an extended period of time[v]. It would be national in scope and would allow for communication through writing, electronic mail, and face-to-face encounters. Participants would be invited into the panel on the basis of their knowledge, commitment, and engagement with the issues as well as their descriptive characteristics. The panel would be moderated by an individual who would act as a facilitator for the dialogue. The moderator would also initially be responsible for providing participants with background information on the policy process and the issues. The specific format of, make-up of, and rules governing participation in the panel would be determined in consultation with activists, scholars, and policy-makers from across the country. While the details of the panel are still quite sketchy I believe this those of us interested in this idea a place to begin talking with others about establishing a social justice panel.

Moving Forward

One of the sub-themes of the Domain Seminar on Social Justice was the need to look to the past as we work for change. Consequently, I believe that part of moving forward is to return to the Domain Seminar for the insights it provided us. The original idea behind the policy research seminars, as I understand it, is to bridge some of the gaps that exist between research, practice, and policy. This meant to be one of the primary foci of the Social Justice Panel. To this end, we must find ways to ensure that researchers, activists, and policy-makers are equitably represented on the Panel. We must also think of other groups that ought to be involved.

This Domain Seminar was meant to have an impact beyond the two days of the event. The seminars are intended to allow participants the opportunity to establish or rediscover links with others interested in similar issues. For some, such as some of the younger scholars who were involved, this kind of event provides an opening to become more known and involved in the field. Given this, I would suggest that as we think of the Panel, we think of ways in which we might involve younger scholars, activists, and policy analysts in the conversation.

The Domain Seminars are not meant to be an end in themselves. They are conceived as events that are part of a long line of policy development in the field. Unlike other events that have preceded them, they consciously hope to create continuity in the policy discussions. There is a measure of continuity that has been planned across the seminars but as the process has evolved, officials of Canadian Heritage have encouraged an extension of the discussions from the individual seminars. Our discussions, for example, were taken forward by some participants to an international conference in December 1999. The lesson out of

this for the Social Justice Panel is that we must consciously seek ways to make the Panel's discussion part of larger public conversations.

The experience of organizing the Domain Seminar also reinforced for me the need to think about the ethical and logistical concerns involved in creating a space for public discussion. We need to work with others to consider not only who to involve but how to ensure their participation over the long term. We need to build a mechanism that forces us to reflect on issues of power and social location as they enter into and structure our conversation. We must think together about which specific topics we would like the panel to address initially and how we will make decisions about future topics of discussion. We need to be concerned about ensuring that discussion is relevant, which presupposes that we will define what we mean by "relevant discussion". Related to this is the idea of defining what might be inappropriate interventions and determining how we would deal with these[vi]. In addition, we need to develop a budget and think of issues like which agencies to approach for funding, how we might compensate people for their participation, and how to determine and provide the supports that each panel member might need to participate effectively and meaningfully.

As the last paragraph in this paper, some might expect this to be a conclusion. I see it more as a point from where to begin the next phase of this work. We must remember that we who were involved in reading and responding to this discussion paper and we who will be involved in the Social Justice Panel are the latest in a long line of concerned citizens trying to reconcile this country's ideals with its practices. We start with the understandings that our predecessors have given us and build on their legacy. We will not achieve social justice in the next three or five years but we will have brought our ideals and practices into closer proximity. And while we are working others will continue their efforts as well. We are not alone in this work but the contribution of each of us is vital.

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[i] While many other federal and provincial government policies address aspects of social justice we have chosen to concentrate on the federal multiculturalism policy because this initiative grew out of a domain seminar on social justice and multiculturalism.

[ii] Indeed, one of my colleagues who works in government calls this sort of process "insultation".

[iii] For more information about this seminar and the papers presented at this event please see *The Proceedings of the Domain Seminar on Social Justice* published by the Department of Canadian Heritage, 2000.

[iv] Mansbridge uses this term to designate issues that are relatively new to the wider political debate and therefore may not be well understood by policy-makers and the public at large.

[v] I would propose that this be at least three years.

[vi] For example, how would we handle racist comments should they arise?

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